

In 1949 I was on an inspection trip on the Kootenai Forest and was staying that night at Ant Flat R. S. I received a call from Missoula early in the morning to return at once because there had been a fire disaster on the Helena Forest.

I drove to Missoula as fast as I could go and arrived there at about 8 AM. I then learned that a crew of smokejumpers had been dropped on a fire on Mann Gulch on the Helena. The fire had spread rapidly and so far as they knew only three had escaped unharmed. Two others were being taken to a hospital in Helena and not expected to live. A fireman from the Helena Forest who was on the fire was also missing.

We quickly organized to take care of the job of dispatching. Men and supplies had to be sent not only to the Helena fire but also to others scattered over the Region. We got Sidney McLaughlin from the office of Personnel to take over all inquiries from relatives, newspapers, etc. about who was on the fire. Everyone who had a relative in the smokejumpers was calling to find out about their relative whether he was on the fire or not. Sid had a list of those on the fire and quickly assured those who had relatives not on the fire to that effect. Sometimes these men were on other fires and he had a little difficulty convincing them he was telling the truth. To relatives of those on the fire he told them frankly that they were missing and he would let them know as soon as we knew. He was a busy man.

Fred Fite was the Regional Dispatcher and Ralph Hand, Alice Paige and I helped him. We split the work. With separate phones Fred Fite handled the orders for airplanes and smokejumpers, Ralph Hand the orders for crews of men other than Smokejumpers, I handled the orders for equipment and supplies, Alice Paige kept a log of the action taken and checked off orders filled. It was a fast and smooth operation. The Regional Forester Percy (Pete) Hanson and the chief of Fire Control, Clayton Crocker, had gone to the Mann Gulch Fire. The Acting Regional Forester came to the Fire Control office and watched the action. He said it was too fast for him to follow.

Slowly, as the bodies were found, the sad news trickled in from the Mann Gulch Fire. The bodies were taken to the morgue at Helena where other smokejumpers and relatives identified the dead. There were 12 that died, the largest loss of life on fires since 1910 in Region One. Only Wagner Dodge, the foreman of the crew, and two other smokejumpers escaped. The Helena ~~Helena~~ Fireman was among those killed.

Two or three days after the bodies were recovered Pete Hanson asked me to go to the fire with Wagner Dodge and visit each spot where a body was found and bury everything left. There were a few finger and foot bones that were not picked up with the bodies. Wagner and I went to the fire and we spent an entire day going over the fire. He showed me not only where each body was found but also showed me where every part of the action from start to finish took place. I will try to explain what I am convinced happened. It would be helpful to anyone reading this account to get a map of the Helena Forest